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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, March 15, 1935.

(FOR BROADCAST USE ONLY)

Subject: "SNAKE STORIES." Information from the Bureau of Biological Survey, United States Department of Agriculture.

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That story about St. Patrick and the snakes in Ireland started me thinking last night about some good snake stories I've heard from different scientists in the Bureau of Biological Survey. You know, we human beings are probably more superstitious about snakes than about any other creatures that crawl. So once a year when we're thinking about St. Patrick, we might take time to talk over the true facts about snakes as the scientists have discovered them, versus old superstitions.

Take the case of the coach-whip, for example. The coach-whip is a slender, swift-moving, brownish-black snake of the southern and southwestern part of the United States -- entirely harmless to man. Yet it has long been a terror to the colored population of the South, and many wierd stories are in circulation of Negroes found dead in the road from being whipped to death by one of these snakes. You see, the coach-whip has a habit of raising the fore part of its body when traveling. And if you happen to be in the front looking back and see the swift-moving snake advancing with its head about a foot in the air -- well, white folks, black folks, and all other kinds of folks usually follow the first impulse to depart hurriedly for parts unknown.

Maybe you've heard a rumor that some snakes steal milk from cows. There's another impossible idea. In order for a snake to close its mouth and suck milk, it would have to sink its fangs into the cow, and you don't have to know much about cows to know that even the most placid isn't going to stand still and let a snake do this. That ought to be sufficient proof that snakes don't suck milk cows -- not even the variety known as the "milk snake."

Perhaps you've heard the myth of a dangerous snake that takes the end of its tail in its mouth and rolls like a hoop and in this position can outrun the fastest horse in the country. This account refers to the horn snake, a harmless snake that never had any idea of traveling hoop-fashion. It is a bluish black snake with a few red bars across its belly, and its tail tapers to a fine point giving it the appearance of a horn or spike. But this spike, contrary to rumors, is quite harmless and incapable of stinging anything.

Another snake that has caused many unwarranted fears is the puffing adder. You may have heard of it by one of its many other names. It is also called the spreading viper, the blowing adder, the hissing viper, and the sand snake. And it is actually one of the greatest bluffers among all snakes. It is harmless but many superstitious stories are told about its poisonous venom. I've even heard that its breath will kill a person twenty feet away. Actually neither its breath nor its bite can do you harm. This snake is not poisonous, and its teeth are too short to inflict a wound even if it tried to bite you.

We have listened all our lives to these superstitious stories about snakes, and many of us have just taken it for granted that all snakes are dangerous and should be killed on sight. That's a sad mistake. Actually most snakes are beneficial -- helpful to the farmer -- and should not be killed without cause. Snakes eat large numbers of insects and mice, many of which are injurious to garden crops and especially to stored grains and foodstuffs.

Kingsnakes used to be considered poisonous. They are not. Kingsnakes are able to kill rattlesnakes and have been known to eat them. In this case, you see, a harmless snake befriends man by helping him get rid of another snake that is dangerous.

Chicken snakes and black snakes sometimes steal eggs and even eat young chicks, but you can stop such losses by snake-proofing your poultry buildings. Then, instead of having chicken dinners, these snakes will include mice, rats, young rabbits, and insects on their menu.

But some few snakes really are poisonous, and in the vicinity of human habitations they should be killed for safety's sake.

Harlequin snakes are poisonous. They often resemble scarlet kingsnakes, and are found from South Carolina across to Arizona and southward to South America. Learn to distinguish between these two snakes and kill only the harlequin; keep and protect the kingsnake.

A group of poisonous snakes called the pit-vipers occur throughout temperate and tropical America. To this class belong rattlesnakes, cotton-mouth water moccasins, and copper heads.

Of course, you must know that there are many different kinds of rattlesnakes. The diamond-back rattler of the South is among the most excitable and most vicious of all the North American pit-vipers. Steer clear of rattlesnakes. Don't take chances around rocky cliffs, or other places where these snakes stay. Rattlesnakes are not given to tree climbing, but they do often stay in swamps!

The cotton-mouth water moccasin of the South is vicious, irritable, and pugnacious. This snake is next to the most poisonous snake in our country. The diamond-back rattler takes first place because of its size. Steer clear of these snakes. They may bite immediately when disturbed, and have been known even to attack and bite without any noticeable provocation.

The copperhead is a very poisonous snake. It frequents rocky places in certain parts of our northeastern States in the vicinity of timber, marshes, and abandoned stone quarries. It is also found in the South on high, dry ground. This snake usually attempts to escape, but is very dangerous when cornered. It gives no warning of its presence as does the rattlesnake, and can strike in any direction instantly.

Ordinarily a snake can strike about three-fourths of its length, so keep your distance around one that is poisonous. If bitten by one, bleed the wound, if possible put a ligature between it and the heart, releasing it at intervals, and get to a doctor in the shortest possible time. Antivenin is the name of the serum that is the most successful means of combating the poison of a snake bite.

These are the St. Patrick's Day Greetings sent to you by the Biological Survey, of the United States Department of Agriculture. If you care to follow this up further, you can get additional information by writing to the Chief of the Bureau, in Washington, D.C.

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